

**U.S. Department of the Interior  
Fish and Wildlife Service**

**FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT (FONSI)**

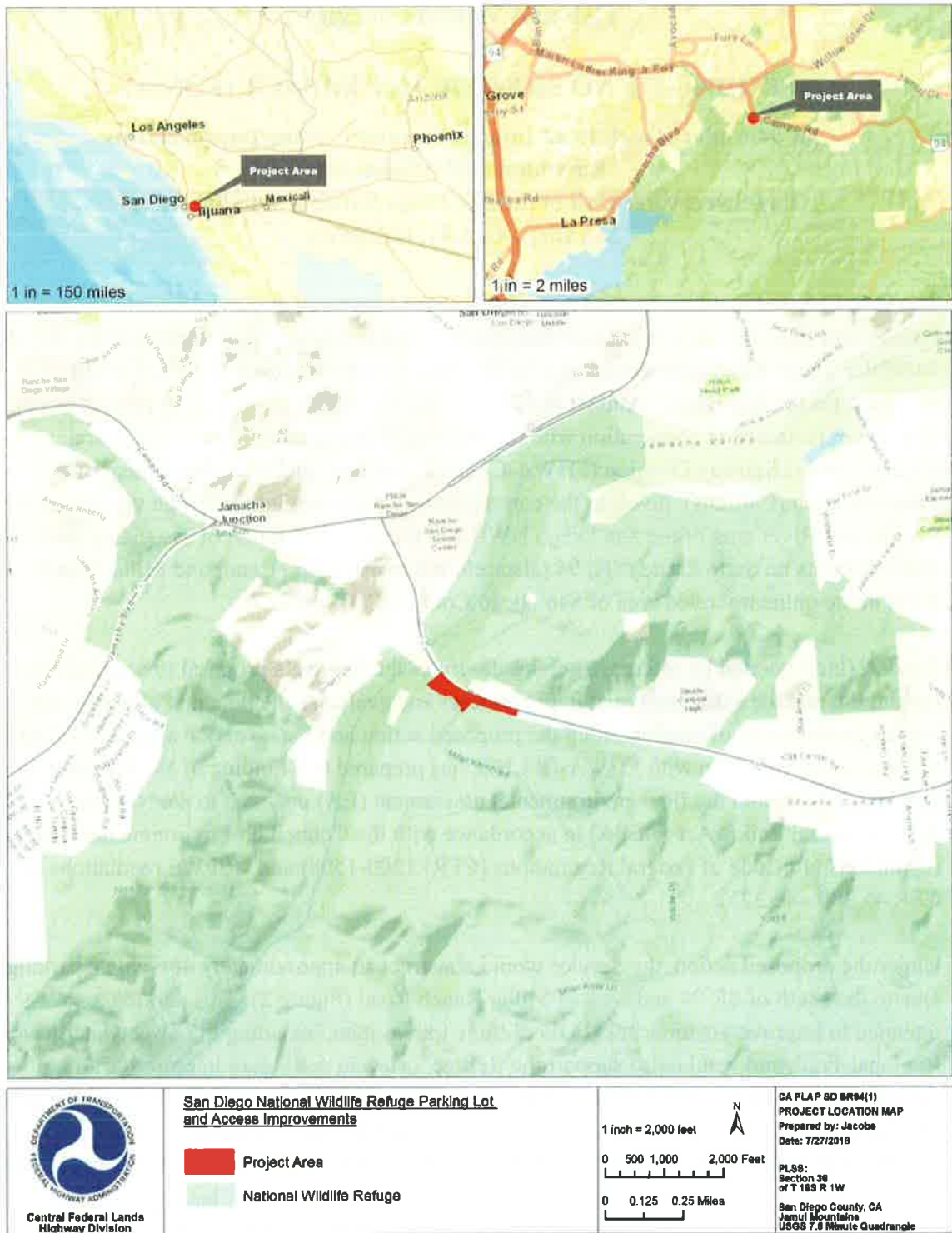
**SR 94/Millar Ranch Road Intersection and Parking Improvements  
Environmental Assessment  
Otay-Sweetwater Unit of the San Diego National Wildlife Refuge  
San Diego County, California**

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service, USFWS) prepared an Environmental Assessment (EA) to evaluate the potential effects to the environment of implementing the SR 94/Millar Ranch Road Intersection and Parking Improvements project (USFWS 2019), proposed for the San Diego National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) (Figure 1). The project, which will be implemented in cooperation with the Federal Highway Administration, Central Federal Lands Highway Division (FHWA-CFLHD) and the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans), involves the construction of a parking lot for refuge visitors on the Sweetwater River area of the San Diego NWR and the implementation of associated roadway improvements on State Route (SR) 94 (also referred to as Campo Road) and Millar Ranch Road in the unincorporated area of San Diego County, California.

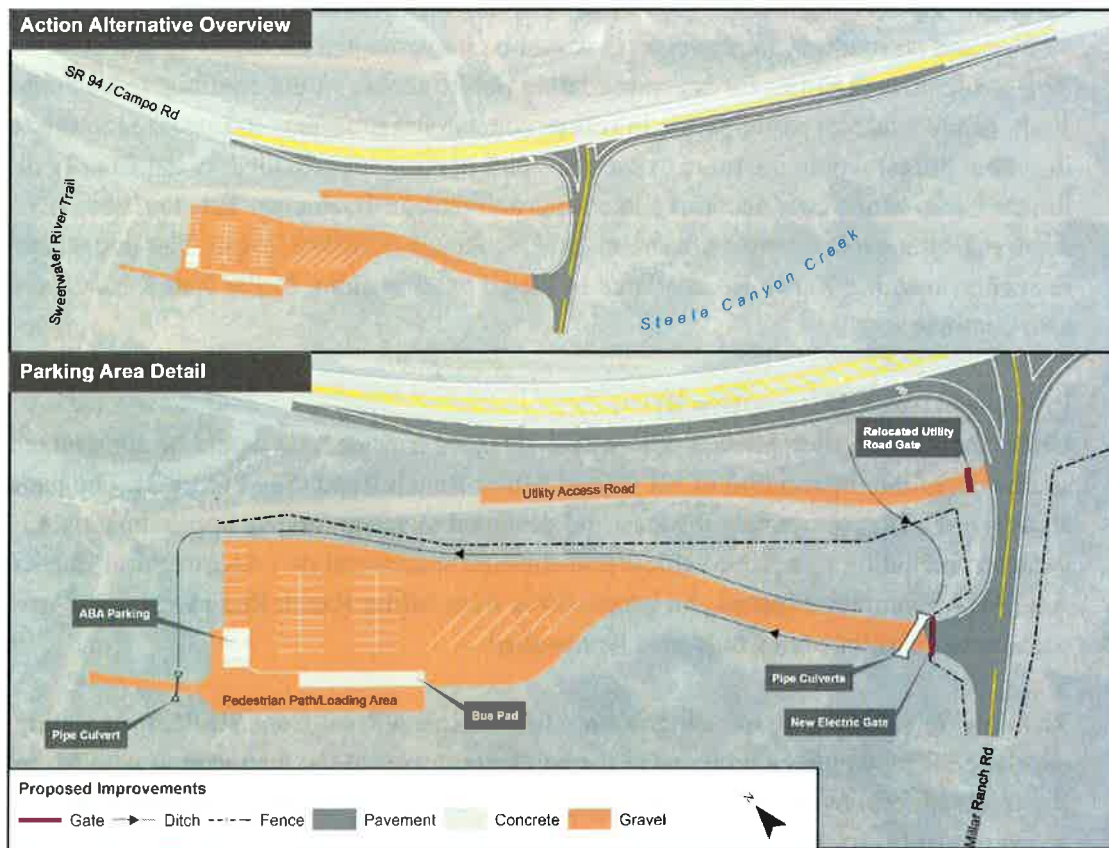
The EA (incorporated by reference herein) describes the Service's proposal to construct the parking lot and the associated road improvements and evaluates the potential effects to the human environment of implementing the proposed action and the no action alternative. The Service, in coordination with FHWA-CFLHD, has prepared this Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) and the final environmental assessment (EA) pursuant to the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) in accordance with the Council on Environmental Quality regulations (40 Code of Federal Regulations [CFR] 1500-1508) and USFWS regulations (43 CFR 46.300 - 46.325).

Under the proposed action, the Service would construct an approximately 40-vehicle parking area to the south of SR 94 and west of Millar Ranch Road (Figure 2). This parking area is intended to improve visitor access to the Refuge trail system, including the Sweetwater River Regional Trail, and would also support the Refuge's current and future interpretive and environmental education programs. An access drive from Millar Ranch Road west to the new parking area would also be constructed. Associated roadway improvements intended to provide safe access to the parking area include widening SR 94 to create a westbound left turn lane onto Millar Ranch Road, an improved eastbound deceleration/turn lane onto Millar Ranch Road, and an eastbound acceleration lane from Millar Ranch Road onto SR 94.

Figure Error! No text of specified style in document.. Project Location Map



**Figure 2. Overview of the Proposed Action – Parking Area and Associated Road Improvements**



## Decision

Following comprehensive review and analysis, the Service selected the proposed action for implementation, because it would have the least impact on the environment, while also supporting wildlife-dependent recreational uses intended to benefit the goals of the San Diego NWR. The proposed action is consistent with the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System and various goals, objectives, and strategies presented in the San Diego NWR Comprehensive Conservation Plan. The proposed action would benefit Refuge resources and its visitors by providing safe and high quality opportunities for compatible wildlife-dependent recreational uses intended to better connect people with nature and foster public appreciation of the Refuge's sensitive species and habitats.

## Alternatives Considered

Following is a brief description of the two alternatives considered in the draft EA. For a complete description of each alternative, see the final EA (USFWS 2019).

### **No Action Alternative (Alternative A)**

Under the No Action Alternative, a visitor parking area would not be constructed on the Refuge and no roadway improvements would be implemented on SR 94 or Millar Ranch Road. Adequate facilities for accommodating public access would continue to be limited. Visitors and students participating in refuge educational programs (transported to the site in school buses) would continue to use the small parking lot provided by the County off Singer Lane, which only accommodates approximately 10 vehicles. This lot is heavily used, reaching capacity most afternoons and weekends (USFWS 2014). The impacts to residents on Millar Ranch Road related to illegal parking along Millar Ranch Road would also continue.

### **Proposed Action (Alternative B)**

Under the Action Alternative, a new gravel-surfaced parking area would be constructed southwest of the intersection of SR 94 and Millar Ranch Road (See Figure 2). The parking area would be approximately 0.9 acre and designed to accommodate approximately 43 vehicles, including five large-vehicle pull-through spaces and two Architectural Barriers Act (ABA)-compliant spaces. An access drive from Millar Ranch Road west to the newly constructed parking area would also be installed.

To allow for safe turning movements onto Millar Ranch Road from SR 94, the existing two-lane SR 94 would be widened to the south/southwest at the intersection with Millar Ranch Road for a length of approximately 1,350 feet. This widening is required to accommodate:

- a new westbound, left-turn lane from SR 94 onto Millar Ranch Road;
- lengthening and improving the existing eastbound, deceleration right-turn lane from SR 94 onto Millar Ranch Road; and
- a new eastbound right-turn acceleration lane from Millar Ranch Road onto SR 94.

Approximately 300 feet of Millar Ranch Road would be improved to accommodate the intersection improvements at SR 94 and the new parking area access road. In addition, Millar Ranch Road from the south end of the parking lot access road south for a distance of approximately 100 feet would be repaved.

## **Environmental Consequences of Implementing the Proposed Action**

The focus of the environmental consequences analysis in the final EA is on issues that are “truly significant to the action in question,” as directed by the 1992 Regulations for Implementing the Procedural Provisions of NEPA (40 CFR Part 1500.1(b)).

After consideration and analysis, the proposed action was determined to have negligible or no impact on the following resources or issues: air quality, land use, noise, paleontological resources, visual quality, geology and soils, greenhouse gas emissions and climate change, hazardous materials, farmland, utilities, economics/employment, and environmental justice (see Table 3-1 in the final EA [USFWS 2019]).

Below is a summary of those issues or resources for which implementing the proposed action could result in potentially adverse effects. In all instances where there is a potential for adverse effects, adequate measures have been incorporated into the scope of the project to avoid and minimize such effects. An in-depth analysis of the potential affects to the environment is provided in the final EA (USFWS 2019).

### **Traffic and Transportation**

Construction of a parking lot on the Refuge would alleviate the overcapacity issues that frequently occur in the small County parking lot east of Singer Lane. The proposed action would also reduce concerns related to illegal parking on Millar Ranch Road. No adverse effects related to parking are therefore anticipated.

The number of vehicles turning at the intersection of Millar Ranch Road and SR 94 would increase with the opening of the parking lot. It is also likely that during the day the wait times required before a vehicle can safely enter westbound SR 94 from Millar Ranch Road would periodically be longer, particularly when a school bus or horse trailer is exiting the area. However, this increase in wait times is not expected to be significant as visitors to the Refuge will be coming and going at various times throughout the day rather than all entering or exiting at one time. Further, the parking lot will close at sunset; therefore, no additional traffic will be generated from the project after dark.

In response to concerns regarding additional trips entering and exiting SR 94, the proposed action includes improvements at the SR 94/Millar Ranch Road intersection. The actions will improve turning movements at the intersection and alleviate backups on SR 94 caused by westbound travelers turning left onto Millar Ranch Road. Project design explored the potential for installing a traffic signal at this intersection, but Caltrans, which has jurisdictional authority over traffic facilities affecting SR 94, determined that a traffic signal at this location did not meet the prescribed warrants based on the 2014 California Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices. The Service's request to install a traffic signal at this location was therefore declined by Caltrans.

Only the south side of SR 94 would be widened to accommodate turn lanes; therefore, two-way traffic can generally be maintained during the road construction phase of the project. There will be times when flaggers will be present to limit travel through the area to one-way at a time causing delays of no more than 20 minutes per passage, unless otherwise approved by Caltrans. Allowing traffic to pass through the construction area without delay on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday from 6:00 AM to 8:00 AM and Wednesday from 7:00 AM to 9:00 AM when school is in session will avoid construction-related traffic delays while students are traveling to and from school. Access will be maintained throughout construction on Millar Ranch Road to accommodate residents, as well as communication and utility facilities.

### **Biological Resources**

**Vegetation/Habitat and Wildlife** - Implementing the proposed action would permanently remove approximately 1.44 acres and temporarily disturb another 2.06 acres of vegetation, for a total of 3.50 acres. The disturbance area includes coastal sage scrub and ruderal/non-native grassland with a native broom baccharis component. Temporarily impacted vegetation will be restored with sage scrub species. The permanent impacts to vegetation and habitat are not considered significant because the loss of this vegetation would not have an appreciable effect on the quality or amount of available habitat for wildlife species.

**Endangered and Threatened Species and Other Species of Concern** - The proposed action would affect an area mapped as critical habitat for the endangered San Diego Ambrosia (*Ambrosia pumila*), however, site surveys have not identified the presence of this species within the project site.

Although there is a small area of good quality sage scrub within the project area, it is of insufficient acreage to support threatened coastal California gnatcatchers (*Poliophtila californica californica*). The site is not designated as critical habitat for this species.

The proposed action would permanently remove approximately 1.2 acres and temporarily affect 1.3 acres of mapped critical habitat for the endangered least Bell's vireo (*Vireo bellii pusillus*). This area of mapped critical habitat consists of upland located adjacent to riparian habitat, and much of the affected area has been previously disturbed. No riparian habitat will be removed, and all areas to be temporarily impacted will be restored with native sage scrub vegetation.

Up to 10 Palmer's ericameria (*Ericameria palmeri*) plants, a San Diego Multiple Species Conservation Program covered species, may be removed as a result of the highway widening east of Millar Ranch Road. To offset impacts to this species, plants grown from

seed obtained onsite or acquired from a nursery will be planted in areas of the project site that were only temporarily affected by construction activity.

Based on the relatively small area affected and the previously disturbed nature of the project area, no adverse effects to the vireo or its critical habitat would occur (USFWS 2017a). To avoid impacts to sensitive species (e.g., gnatcatchers, vireos) during the breeding season, no vegetation removal associated with the project will be permitted between February 15 and September 1.

**Migratory Birds** - Although the proposed action would permanently remove approximately 1.4 acres of migratory bird nesting and foraging habitat (another 2.1 acres would be temporarily affected but revegetated with sage scrub species), and human activity in the immediate area would increase, the Refuge provides over 12,000 acres of nesting and foraging habitat for migratory birds. Therefore, the loss of nesting and foraging habitat within the project site is not considered significant.

#### **Water Resources**

**Hydrology** - Existing drainage culverts under SR 94 would be extended to accommodate the widened highway and maintain existing drainage patterns. This change and the relatively minor grading associated with proposed action would not substantively alter existing drainage patterns within the project area.

**Water Quality** - The proposed action would result in only a minor increase in impervious surfaces, with the majority of the parking area remaining mostly pervious, allowing water to infiltrate the ground. Runoff from impervious surfaces would be captured in vegetated drainage ditches that would release the water as sheet flow to minimize the potential for water quality impacts to the surrounding watershed. Implementing best management practices would further minimize potential water quality impacts associated with the project.

**Floodplains** - A portion of the project occurs within the FEMA floodway and 100-year and 500-year floodplains. All activities within the floodplain are located on federal land, and the project complies with federal regulations. The project has been designed in accordance with FHWA Policy 23 CFR 650A and Executive Order 11988. Work within the floodway, which occurs at the southern end of Millar Ranch Road in the project area, is limited to resurfacing and would match the existing surface elevation. Therefore, no rise in elevation would occur within the regulatory floodway. The only location with a net gain of fill is within the 100-year floodplain required for culvert installation underneath the parking area access road. This has been designed to minimize fill and impacts to the floodplain, and would not raise the base flood elevation more than one foot.

**Cultural Resources** - No archeological or historic properties were identified within the area proposed to be disturbed. However, because of the poor survey visibility in some areas and the archaeological sensitivity of the area, a qualified archaeologist and a Kumeyaay cultural monitor will be present during excavation to ensure no adverse effects to cultural resources occur.

In the event of an inadvertent discovery, archeological remains or specimens will not be removed or damaged, and all appropriate actions as required by current state and federal regulations will be implemented.

**Cumulative Impacts** - No long-term adverse effects related to traffic, transportation, or cultural resources are expected. Because there would be no project impact to add to other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions, no adverse cumulative impacts would occur to these resources.

The proposed action would result in a minor increase of impervious surface, which could adversely affect water quality when added to existing and proposed development in the area. However, with the implementation of the Stormwater Pollution Prevention Plan and adherence to federal and state regulations, cumulative water quality impacts of the project would be negligible.

Management of the San Diego NWR in accordance with refuge purposes would result in long-term benefits for native species and habitats, including special status species; therefore, when combined with the beneficial actions proposed in the CCP, the proposed action would result in nominal cumulative impacts to biological resources.

## **Public and Agency Involvement**

**Background.** The proposed action was originally presented and evaluated in the programmatic EA for the San Diego NWR CCP. The CCP and accompanying EA were the subject of an extensive public involvement process that is described in the final CCP/EA and FONSI dated May 16, 2017 (USFWS 2017b).

**Public Review of the Project Draft EA.** The SR 94/Millar Ranch Road Intersection and Parking Improvements draft EA was made available for public review and comment between December 11, 2018 and January 10, 2019. We published a Notice of Availability of the draft EA in the San Diego Union Tribune on December 11, 2018, and mailed over 120 notices announcing the availability of the draft EA to surrounding property owners; local, State, and Federal agencies; special districts; tribes; interested organizations; potential user groups; and other interested members of the public.



County-recognized community planning groups overseeing the areas of Jamul, Spring Valley, Valle de Oro, and Dehesa were sent notices and a copy of the draft EA. Copies of the draft EA were also sent to the California State Clearinghouse (SCH#2018124001) for distribution to interested state agencies. Printed copies of the draft EA were made available for review at Rancho San Diego Branch Library and at the San Diego NWR Complex office. The draft EA was also available for viewing and downloading on the San Diego NWR Refuge website.

The Service received 18 comment letters and one phone call during the public comment period. These letters and our responses are provided in Appendix D of the final EA. Those who provided comments will receive a compact disc (CD) containing the FONSI and final EA. Underlined text in the final EA represents changes made between the draft EA and Final EA in response to comments received during the public comment period.

The public comments received were considered by the Service during our analysis of the proposed action and no action alternatives, including the effects to the human environment. We also considered this input in selecting the preferred alternative for implementation.

### **Conclusions**

Based on review and evaluation of the information contained in the supporting references, it is my determination that implementing the proposed action does not constitute a major federal action that would significantly affect the quality of the human environment within the meaning of Section 102(2)(c) of the NEPA of 1969. Accordingly, the Service is not required to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement.

This FONSI and supporting references are on file at the USFWS, San Diego NWR Complex, 1080 Gunpowder Point Drive, Chula Vista, CA 91910 and are available for public inspection. Interested and affected parties are being notified of our decision through a public notice, press release, and website update. For more information, contact Jill Terp, Refuge Manager, at 619-468-9245 extension 226 or [Jill\\_Terp@fws.gov](mailto:Jill_Terp@fws.gov).

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Assistant Regional Director, Refuges  
Pacific Southwest Region

4.4.19  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## **Supporting References**

- USFWS. 2014. San Diego National Wildlife Refuge Draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan and Environmental Assessment. June 2014.
- USFWS. 2017a. Endangered Species Act Section 7 Consultation Form for the Millar Ranch Road Parking and SR 94 Highway Widening Project. San Diego NWR. March 2017.
- USFWS. 2017b. San Diego National Wildlife Refuge Final Environmental Assessment and Finding of No Significant Impacts. May 16, 2017.
- USFWS. 2019. SR 94/Millar Ranch Road Intersection and Parking Improvements Final Environmental Assessment. February 2019.